

156 The President's News Conference of
April 18, 1969

QUESTIONS

NORTH KOREA'S ATTACK ON U.S. RECONNAISSANCE FLIGHT

[1.] Q. Mr. President, the question on all of our minds is where do we go from here with the incident of the shooting down of the plane?¹ What further action might you contemplate diplomatically and militarily?

THE PRESIDENT. Mr. Cormier [Frank Cormier, Associated Press], first, I think a word with regard to the facts in this case: As was pointed out in the protest that was filed at Panmunjom yesterday and also in the Defense Department statement, the

¹ On April 15, 1969, in the Sea of Japan, some 100 miles off the Korean coast.

plane involved was an unarmed Constellation, propeller-driven.

The mission was a reconnaissance mission which at no time took the plane closer to the shores of North Korea than 40 miles. At the time the plane was shot down, all of the evidence that we have indicates that it was shot down approximately 90 miles from the shores of North Korea while it was moving outward, aborting the mission on orders that had been received. We knew this, based on our radar.

What is also even more important, the North Koreans knew it, based on their radar. Therefore, this attack was unprovoked. It was deliberate. It was without warning. The protest has been filed. The North Koreans have not responded.

Now a word with regard to why we

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MISSILE CAPABILITY OF THE SOVIET UNION

[10.] Q. Mr. President?

THE PRESIDENT. Yes, Mr. Scali [John A. Scali, ABC News].

Q. Secretary [of State William P.] Rogers said at a recent news conference that if and when we begin talks with the Soviets on missiles, one of the first questions to be asked them is why they find it necessary to build a big missile with a 25 megaton warhead.

Since the Russian decision to proceed to build such an enormous missile is one of the major factors in your going ahead with the ABM, the question is: Why are we waiting to ask that question for the beginning of negotiations? Why don't we ask it now?

THE PRESIDENT. Well, Mr. Scali, in a sense I think Secretary Rogers probably asked the question by stating it as he did in a press conference. As you know, because you have covered these diplomatic matters for many years, in dealing with the Soviet Union or any other nation, this type of question is not always asked simply on a formal basis in a diplomatic conference.

Sometimes the best way to handle it is to state the position publicly. As far as Secretary Rogers' statement is concerned, I share his puzzlement as to why the Soviet Union is moving so heavily in this direction. As far as the Soviet Union's intentions are concerned, and I want to clarify one point that is made, the question as to their intentions is not something that I am going to comment upon. I don't know what their intentions are.

But we have to base our policy on their capabilities and when we project their SS-9 plans to 1972 or 1973, if we allow

those plans to go forward without taking any action on our part, either offensively or defensively, to counteract them, they will be substantially ahead of the United States in overall nuclear capability. We cannot allow that to happen.

I would remind the members of this press corps—I am here at a time when the United States faces a threat, not of the magnitude that President Kennedy faced at the time of the Cuban missile crisis—but I would remind the members of this press corps that at that time all of the professional experts agreed that the U.S. superiority was at least 4 to 1 and maybe 5 to 1, over the Soviet Union in terms of overall nuclear capability.

Now we don't have that today. That gap has been closed. We shall never have it again because it will not be necessary for us. Sufficiency, as I have indicated, is all that is necessary. But I do say this: I do not want to see an American President in the future, in the event of any crisis, have his diplomatic credibility be so impaired because the United States was in a second-class or inferior position. We saw what it meant to the Soviets when they were second. I don't want that position to be the United States in the event of a future diplomatic crisis.

SOVIET ROLE IN THE PLANE INCIDENT

[11.] Q. Mr. President, could you tell us what the Soviet role has been in the plane incident, and could you go beyond that and tell us what were some of the other elements that figured in your deliberations on how to properly respond to the downing of the plane?

THE PRESIDENT. The Soviet role in the plane incident, first, is one of being of as-